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ABSTRACT

The literature shows that state federations of labor should be, and many are, actively involved in current state literacy initiatives. The United States must develop a coherent and comprehensive system of lifetime education. This will require a greater commitment of public and private resources to education and training. Too many employers are reluctant or unwilling to provide training to the majority of their employees who are not managerial or supervisory workers. The number of employers who are conducting workplace literacy programs has increased, but most still see no need for such programs. However, providing education and training to workers is a sound business investment. On the other hand, unions in the manufacturing, service, building, and public sectors have expanded worker education and training programs to unprecedented levels. Workers and their unions must be involved from the very beginning in all aspects of designing and implementing a workplace education and literacy program. Unions will not accept a role limited to recruiting learners. A critical first step to establishing a workplace education or literacy program is for an employer and union to identify the specific objectives of the proposed program. Worker-centered or learner-centered approaches are best for both the employer and the employee. Quotations from bibliographic sources are interspersed throughout the text. (16 references) (YLB)

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Organized Labor's Participation

in State Workplace Literacy Initiatives

Prepared for
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"The organized labor movement realizes that education is not an arbitrary thing that automatically ends with a certain year of life, but that it must continue throughout life if the individual is really to live and make progress... [Unions] ... realize that education is an attitude toward life – an ability to see and understand problems and to utilize information and forces for the best solution of [life's] problems."

- Samuel Gompers in a speech to teachers, July 1916

1. **Many state federations of labor (also known as state AFL-CIOs) are actively involved in current state literacy initiatives.**

   * An informal survey of state federations in late 1989 revealed significant involvement. Some of the most active were Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin. Among them, at least eight state AFL-CIOs had received federal or state government funding to operate basic skills programs.

2. **It is critical that the United States develop a coherent and comprehensive system of lifetime education for all children, youth, and adults. This will require a greater commitment of public as well as private resources to education and training.**

   * "...the responsibility for investing in the workforce of the future resides primarily in the private sector. It is important, therefore, to establish an environment that encourages private investment in human capital." (Commission on Workforce Quality)

   * U. S. public and private spending on pre-primary, primary, and secondary education is lower than in most other industrialized nations. (Rashell and Mishel)

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3. **Too many employers are reluctant or unwilling to provide training of any kind to the vast majority of their employees: non-managerial and non-supervisory workers. Advocates of workplace education and literacy programs are likely to encounter corporate investment policies that value quick and immediate returns over long-term competitiveness.**

* "Despite the widespread belief that private sector training is so extensive that it rivals the formal education system, available evidence suggests that employers underprovide training to blue-collar workers. According to a recent Conference Board study, only 18 percent of manufacturing firms provided non-exempt workers with training programs -- compared to the 33 percent who provided such programs for managerial employees and the 28 percent who offered programs to sales and marketing workers. Another survey, by the Bureau of National Affairs, provided similar but more startling results. Fully 60 percent of firms surveyed provided courses to managers, 50 percent to professional and technical workers, yet only 18 percent to nonexempt employees. Additional evidence on this point comes from a content analysis of training courses offered to firms by outside vendors. Only 14 percent of the more than 1500 courses surveyed claimed to serve other than clerical or managerial employees." (Osterman)

* Only 10% of all workers receives any kind of formal training on the job, and most of those workers who get training are "managers and technical elites." Employers spend less than 1.5% of their total payroll costs on the education and training of their employees. (Carnevale et al., The Learning Enterprise)

* "It has been estimated that employers spend $30 billion annually on formal training. While this amount seems large, it is important to remember that these expenditures are spread across 108 million workers and equal only 1.4 percent of firms' payroll expenses. In addition, the expenditures are very unevenly distributed across workers, with high-wage workers receiving the vast majority of the training." (Commission on Workforce Quality)

4. **The number of employers who are running workplace literacy programs have increased, but most still see no need.**

* "Despite surveys showing that a significant proportion of job applicants lack basic reading, writing, or arithmetic skills, barely one in four companies questioned by the Society for Human Resource Management offers remedial classes to workers....Of the 74% that don't offer any basic training, however, most don't see any reason to get involved...Many beg off by saying that they don't have the expertise, it's too expensive or it's somebody else's job. Only a few have tried it and found it didn't work. The findings, says the society, suggest that most firms don't see 'the basic skills crisis' as their problem yet." (Wall Street Journal, 11/7/89)

5. **Providing education and training to workers is a sound business investment.**

* A study on productivity growth from 1929 to 1982 by Edward Denison found that increased worker education (26%) was second only to advances in knowledge (54%) among the factors that enhanced productivity during that 53-year period. In comparison, increases in machinery, plant and equipment contributed only 15% of productivity growth. (Cunningham)

* But education and training programs sponsored solely by an employer may become too narrowly focused:

"Economic theory indicates that companies will invest in the job-specific skills of their employees, but not in basic skills. This is because the payoff to any particular employer of an investment in basic skills is

long term and those skills are highly portable--employees can move on to another company with no net gain at all to the employer who paid for their training." (Chisman)

6. **Unions in the manufacturing, service, building, and public sectors have expanded worker education and training programs to unprecedented levels.**

   * "Outside of government, some of the most aggressive drives for worker literacy come from the trade unions, which are pressing for education benefits for members." (New York Times, 9/6/89)

   * Joint union-employer education and training programs are frequently cited by recent studies of workplace literacy programs as the largest, oldest, most comprehensive, and most innovative.

   * The collective bargaining agreement between union and employer provides

     - stable financial support
     - adequate safeguards to participating workers
     - a structure that enables genuine involvement of workers in all aspects of the program design and implementation.

   * Union-involved programs often incorporate the functional context approach using actual job materials with learners. (Shanker)

7. **Workers and their unions must be involved from the very beginning in all aspects of designing and implementing a workplace education and literacy program. Unions will not accept a role limited to recruiting learners.**

   * Workplace literacy programs, like all other worker education and training programs, are directly linked to job security, advancement, classifications, and the overall relationship between management and bargaining unit employees.

   * "Sensitivity is important because the potential for misunderstanding is great. Employees need to be reassured that the [literacy program] will not result in loss of jobs. If they know what is going on and why, they are more likely to support the establishment of a training program. Without employee concurrence and cooperation, the Workplace Basics program will never leave the launching pad." (Carnevale et al., Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want)

   * "...workers want to participate in the design of these programs. Recent successful collaborations between unions and management in the automobile and telecommunications industries, as well as participative training programs in computer and health care industries, have shown the tremendous value of worker input in the design and operation of training programs. (Commission on Workforce Quality)

8. **A critical first step to establishing a workplace education or literacy program is for an employer and union to identify the specific objectives of the proposed program.**

   * "Literacy" or "basic skills" can encompass a wide range of competencies beyond reading, writing, and mathematics. (Carnevale, Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want)

   * Reading on the job is often different from the reading taught in school. (Mikulecky)

   * There is no standard measure or test for literacy skills of adults. (Kirsch et al.)

9. Worker-centered or learner-centered approaches are best for both the employer and the employee.

* "In establishing this program, the United Steelworkers of America and Bethlehem are implementing a shared vision that workers must play a significant role in the design and development of their jobs, their training and education, and their working environment. In a world economy many changes are unforeseen and unpredictable. Corporate success, worker security and employee satisfaction all require that the workforce and individual workers be capable of reacting to change, challenge, and opportunity. This, in turn, requires ongoing training, education, and growth. Experience has shown that worker growth and development are stunted when programs are mandated from above but flourish in an atmosphere of voluntary participation in self-designed and self-directed training and education. These shared beliefs shall be the guiding principles of the United Steel Workers - Bethlehem Career Development Program."

* Guiding principles of the United Auto Workers - Ford Motor Reading Academy, Eastern Michigan University:

    1. Build on what adult learners already know.
    2. Teachers and learners are equal partners in the learning process.
    3. Make the learning environment relevant and authentic in the eyes of the learner. (Fingeret)

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